

# Building Up the Church

## Ephesians 4:7-16

First, it was supposed to be *Friendship Sunday*. Then, we needed to install some new elders and one deacon. Then, we wanted to recognize our graduates. Then, we wanted to give another elder and his family a gracious send-off, not to mention a warm meal, before they return to the Arctic Circle or wherever Minnesota is actually located. Can we do it all in one day some have asked, and should we if we are also hoping to host a number of guests that may not understand everything that's going on?

I concluded, "Sure, why not?" What better glimpse of the real church can we provide? It's people. More than that, it's people who by the miracle of Jesus, belong to one another. They need leadership that they will follow and that they trust God has provided. So, if you're visiting, that's why we install leaders as you saw us do earlier. A church is a family that rejoices together when one member has an occasion to rejoice, so that's why you saw us congratulate our various graduates. The sadness of seeing a family move away is a shared sadness, and we do what lots of folks do when they're sad – we eat. And, that's why we invite each of you to join us for dinner after this service ends.

But one of the most remarkable things about this community we call a church is that we believe that Jesus provides each and every member with some gift, some tool, to help him to build up the church.

<sup>7</sup>But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

Every Christian has received grace from God to make the church stronger. Every Christian is a steward of some gift that contributes to the health of the whole. In fact, our unique gifts and talents belong to the church every bit as much as they belong to us, for they are provided by Christ for His purposes. We are not gifted uniformly. We are each gifted according to the will of Christ.

Paul does not mention every conceivable way in which Christ might gift different people in a church. Here, he zeros-in on only a few even though he has the many in mind. The few are those called as equippers for the many, which is all God's people. The few are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These folks were essential to the development of the early church.

I don't believe that any of us are apostles or prophets. I'll share why when we get there. Most Christians are not evangelists in the sense Paul is using the term. Most are not pastors or teachers. But, we are all "God's people" mentioned in verse 12 who need to be prepared for "works of service." All are gifted to build up the church, the Body of Christ. Not every believer's gift will place him front and center before a crowd. In a Christian's entire life, only a very few people might be directly touched by any one person's gift, but that is appropriate. After all, the church is built as God's people are built. That happens collectively, but it also happens one believer at a time. As we consider this diverse meting out of gifts by Christ for the building up of His church, let us consider ...

## I. The Giver in the Church (7-10)

### A. Jesus Is a Different Kind of King verses 7, 8

<sup>7</sup>But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. <sup>8</sup>This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."

This is a significant modification of David's words in Psalm 68:18. David spoke of a king who received gifts *from* men, *not* one who gives gifts *to* men. When a conquering king became ruler over a captive people, he lined them up, marched them in front of the home town fans and took their stuff. Depending on the circumstances, we might call what they took tribute or we might call it the spoils of war, for David spoke of receiving gifts "even from the rebellious". Paul knew of a different kind of conquering king, a more generous one, so the Holy Spirit granted him a degree of literary license.

We *are* slaves of Christ, and He *does* demand we surrender everything to him as a rightful tribute. Paul calls us to be living sacrifices. But Jesus, our King, also endows His subjects with gifts from His grace. When we lay everything at the feet of Jesus, we still walk away with more than we could ever sacrifice. If we are empty enough, He fills us with the tools we need to be fruitful servants. His gifts of grace to us equip us far beyond the meager limits of our natural human skills, talents and strength.

The ascent David was speaking of was the steep climb to Jerusalem or Mount Zion as a conquering king led his captives on parade. That ascent implied a descent from Jerusalem to go to war. Paul takes a brief aside to explain how the ascent of Jesus on high presupposed a descent from on high.

### **B. Jesus Walked with Men in His "Ministry of Descent" verse 9**

<sup>9</sup>(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?)

Paul is talking about the Incarnation, that period in time when God became flesh. Jesus Christ coming in the flesh represents a 33-year span in human history when God provided an aperture through which man could look to Jesus and behold God. Paul wrote of Jesus: "Who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:6,7).

John put it this way: "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). All of the light, grace, truth, power, beauty and glory of God rested upon Jesus, Who chose to be bound by the limitations of human flesh. Jesus poured out healing on many as He was moved with compassion by human need. He responded with grace to sinners looking for heaven's remedies to their plights. But, as mighty as they were, His miracles and works of mercy were limited to the people with whom Jesus came in direct contact. In the flesh, He taught His disciples the character in which they should minister. Then, He returned to His Father and left it up to them.

### **C. Now Jesus Leads the Church by a "Ministry of Ascent" verse 10**

<sup>10</sup>(He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

During His ministry of *descent*, Jesus moved through Palestine. *Ascended*, He fills the universe and distributes gifts for ministry to His people. Rarely is His work carried out in the same spectacular fashion as it was when He walked among us: miraculous healings, resurrections, wonders of nature. Perhaps, on occasion, it is, but that does not seem to be the program for the church, for boundless miracle power at our fingertips really would not demand much sacrifice from us, would it? The church is to minister to the world in Jesus' Name, not to work great sign and wonders that validate Who Jesus is. We are to minister joyfully with whatever tools Christ places at our disposal.

Jesus told His disciples, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even **greater** things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Jesus did not limit this promise to His Twelve Apostles but to anyone who has faith in Him. What in the world would the Twelve, or anyone, ever do that that was **greater** than calming a stormy sea or calling a man back to life after death's stench had already set in? Jesus miraculously fed two huge multitudes. Now, others would do even greater things after He returned to His Father? What? How?

Jesus was speaking of works of "greater scope" not necessarily of a greater sensationalistic nature. Miracles dazzle people. This world needs to see transformed lives ministering to others sacrificially. As amazing as His three-year ministry on earth was, Jesus accomplishes so much more now through believers around the world. We are His hands and His feet. We are His church, the body of Christ.

That's a great plan. So, why does the church not always reflect the Person and the power of Christ, her Head? The refusal to empty ourselves of self, motives that are less than servant-hearted and other evidences of residual sin and pride get in the way. If Christ is to do His work from heaven, His earthly vessels, you and I, must empty ourselves so that He can fill us with His vast and limitless resources. Jesus has not even scratched the surface of what He can do through a surrendered people.

## **II. The Divine Gifts to the Church (11,12)**

### **A. Some Roles in the Church Come with Labels verse 11**

<sup>11</sup>It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers ...

Here, "apostles" refers to a number of eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus, sent out to preach, and not simply to His Twelve Apostles. The precise number of these apostles is undisclosed. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul stated that the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter, to the Twelve, to a group of 500, to James, to "all the apostles" and finally, to him. "Prophets" proclaimed God's counsel as it was revealed to them. "Apostles and prophets" were God's spokesmen in the early days of the church.

"Apostles and prophets" are treated collectively in Ephesians. The "apostles and prophets" laid the church's foundation, establishing its authoritative doctrine (Ephesians 2:20). The "apostles and prophets" received God's eternal mystery that in Christ, all people of faith, regardless of their earlier distinctions, are rendered one new nation (Ephesians 3:5, 6). These men were crucial to the establishment of the early church upon a sound foundation. But those eyewitness apostles died and the prophetic office fell into abuse by charlatans. Over time, as the testimony of authentic apostles and prophets was collected, the church's dependency on additional revelation became less crucial.

"Evangelists" are "messengers of good tidings". Missionaries to new fields or those in local churches who excel in leading unbelievers to faith might be considered evangelists today. "Pastors" is the Latin word for *poimen*, which means shepherds. "Teachers" impart truth. James notes that not many should aspire to be teachers because of the accountability to God that goes with that task. Both of these roles operate in local churches today. Some students of the Bible consider these to be distinct roles. Others view pastor-teacher as a single role. Pastors are clearly church elders, for Paul refers to the work of shepherding when he addresses elders. But, one of the qualifications for a church elder is that he be able to teach. On the other hand, Paul also refers to elders that excel above other elders in teaching. So, whether pastor and teacher is one role or two, they are certainly closely connected.

So, what is that local preacher? Is he a pastor, a teacher, a pastor-teacher or an evangelist? Some from the Christian Church heritage feel strongly that he is an “evangelist” and that calling him a “pastor” is careless at best or worse, an attempt to wrestle power from the New Testament eldership. I always liked the term minister, because it kept everyone guessing, or “preacher” because it is the most descriptive term for my role. But, when I weigh in on the debate, the first thing I say is “Call me anything, just don’t call me late to dinner!” Secondly, I would add, “These are descriptions of function. They are not titles. Let a man’s gift settle what His label ought to be. The infatuation with “titles of office” over simple “labels for function” only preoccupies the minds of servants in wrong places.

## **B. All of God's People are Servants verse 12a**

<sup>12</sup>to prepare God’s people for works of service ...

The role-players that Paul mentions by title do not exhaust the sum-total of Christian ministry. On the contrary, these have been given to the church to prepare *all* of God's people to serve. What does the word “service” convey to you? Does it sound like something Boy Scouts, Service Club members or soldiers would do? The meaning was clear to the original Greek-speaking audience. “Service” is *diakonias*, a form of *diakonos* (or deacon) which means “servant”. “Service” is what a servant does. Policemen “police” things. Builders “build” things. Painters “paint” things. Dog-catchers “catch dogs.” Grasping the pattern? Servants serve. Servanthood is our calling in Jesus. We can be faithful or unfaithful servants, but we cannot escape the simple reality that we are called to be servants.

Paul's emphasis is on serving, not on “discovering” one’s spiritual gift. As servants of Christ, do what you can when you see a need. It is through the *willingness* to be a servant that we most efficiently discover where we are and where we are not gifted. Most believers will never pass through the spot-light of a worship service or stand behind a lectern. But, most people know what they have the heart, mind and ability to try for God. And, it is through serving that we discover things about our giftedness.

## **III. The Divine Goals for the Church (12b–16)**

### **A. Christ Equips Us All to Build Up His Body verses 12b–14**

... so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Equippers prepare God’s people for the service of building the church. Building the church is more than simply growing numerically by any means necessary. Building the church is certainly more than erecting structures. The church is built up only as God's people are built up. A person who builds God's people builds Christ’s church. A person who tears them down works against Christ.

Paul speaks of maturity as being “not tossed back and forth by the waves.” It takes little to distract immature believers. They are easily manipulated, fascinated and intimidated. Religious charlatans win a following among the naive. Religious legalists fuel spiritual pride in some young believers and guilt in others. Religious sensationalists distract new believers by causing them to hunger for experience and to measure all things by subjective intuition, rendering them more narcissistic than spiritual, but blind to the fact. All these undermine the simple agenda of true equippers: to get servants to work, building up the church in ways that are truly meaningful and helpful.

## **B. In the Process of Building Up the Church, We All Grow Up In Christ verses 15, 16**

<sup>15</sup>Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

<sup>16</sup>From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The mission of the church and the reason that Christ gifts His people is to showcase that God is reconciling people to Himself and to one another under the Lordship of Jesus. All our gifts must be directed toward showing the world that the love of God in Christ makes believers one, and that this oneness supersedes every divisive barrier among men - race, gender, generation, social status, nation.

Most churches are far from perfect. We are easily sidetracked from truly important matters. Our odd rituals, short-sighted policies, infighting and plain old stubbornness can create some real messes. Of course, our own children make messes when they try to prove that they are more grown up than they are. Still, we do not give up on them or cease to love and encourage them. Longsuffering as we are on a good day, we're not nearly the parents that our heavenly Father is. He remains willing to let His children, His church, be His hands in this world. It's really quite astounding.

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